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Roger Bowen

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Poet in Transition: Philip Larkin's *XX Poems*

An appreciation of Philip Larkin's development from the self-conscious lyricism of *The North Ship* (1945), with its debt to the "music" of Yeats, to the new, spare tone of *The Less Deceived* (1955), where the allegiances to Hardy and Auden emerge strongly, forms the foundation of an acceptance of Larkin's contribution to post-war British poetry. In his introduction to the second edition of *The North Ship*, Larkin acknowledges this change of master¹ and makes it too easy for us to respond to the poet's voice as one which begins in error and out of character in 1945, recovers and discovers itself in 1955 with *The Less Deceived*, and moves on from there, growing in authority from *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) to *High Windows* (1974). We see a second and abrupt beginning rather than a gradual, but still purposeful transition.

Between Larkin's widely known first and second volumes lies the privately printed *XX Poems* (1951),² only 100 copies of which were distributed. *XX Poems* is Larkin's first collection to mark a different set of poetic objectives, to suggest a different poetic character. In 1948, a manuscript entitled *In the Grip of Light* had failed at six major London publishing houses. Three years later, tentatively and modestly, Larkin tries to reassess his talent. This slim pamphlet is an exploration of new possibilities and a contemplation of old but persistent habits; it is, in essence, a cautious manifesto. Thirteen of these 20 poems were later added to *The Less Deceived*,³ and the 16 new poems which make up that volume only pursue the style he had begun to develop in *XX Poems*, refining and expanding what had proved to be the most effective elements, and confirming a more authentic identity, one which depends on a controlled use of metaphor, confidence in the ironic stance, and a realization that the "conventional was compatible with a total devotion to poetry."⁴

With its small distribution, this first utterance of a poet struggling to re-appraise style and subject matter was doomed to anonymity. He did win the attention of one important critic, D. J. Enright, but the journal in which the review appeared, *The Month*, did not command a wide readership.⁵ *XX Poems* hardly caused a ripple in the year of its publication. Four years before the Marvell Press launched *The Less Deceived* and caught the public's attention Larkin had, nonetheless, begun to sound the change for his own work and that of his generation.

In his introduction to the Larkin selection in *British Poetry Since 1945*, Edward Lucie-Smith refers to *The Less Deceived* as providing the "signal for the Movement to begin,"⁶ but this signal may be noticed from the same poet in 1951, a year which saw little sign of "movement" from Larkin's colleagues who were later to be assembled in Robert Conquest's anthology, *New Lines* (1956). Only John Wain's *Mixed Feelings* comes to mind from this early a point in the fifties, and it is a far less significant offering than *XX Poems* by a much less accomplished poetic craftsman. Two years later, Kingsley Amis, Larkin's undergraduate contemporary and friend at Oxford, brought out *A Frame of Mind*;⁷ Elizabeth Jennings published *Poems* in 1953, while D. J. Enright, the "Lawrence Durrell of the Movement," as Lucie-Smith styles him, offered *The Laughing Hyena* in the same year. In 1954, Donald Davie, Amis, John Holloway, and Larkin all appeared in the *Fantasy Poets* series,⁸ and Thom Gunn emerges with *Fighting Terms*. Amis, Davie, Gunn, Jennings, and Larkin earned a place in G. S. Fraser's and Iain Fletcher's *Springtime: An Anthology of Young Poets* (1953). Larkin is represented by "Poems Selected from a Set of Twenty" (comprising "Wedding-Wind," VII, XII, "Wants," and XIX). Apart from Enright's review this marks the only public recognition of *XX Poems*. Despite Fraser's acknowledgment and the space afforded Larkin, the anonymity is not entirely dispelled. In the anthology's introduction no direct mention is made of Larkin's two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). Furthermore, he is categorized as a "regionalist" and mistakenly identified as an Irish poet!⁹

Had Larkin obtained a prestigious publisher in 1951 he might well have had an earlier and more substantial influence, and his ultimate separation from the Movement might have been appreciated sooner. As Ian Hamilton remarks in his essay, "The Making of the Movement," "Philip Larkin's poems provide a precise model for what the Movement was supposed to be seeking. But having noticed his lucidity, his debunkery, his technical accomplishment and other such 'typical' 'attributes,' one would still be left with the different and deeper task of describing the quality of his peculiar genius, the task of talking about poems rather than postures."¹⁰ By focusing attention on representative pieces from *XX Poems* we can witness the process of his commitment to a new and more assured voice, and his emerging independence from false or inappropriate masters. This volume perfectly illustrates Larkin in transition and the germ of his "peculiar genius."

II

The title page, apart from a dedication to Kingsley Amis, indicates that the poems included were all written between 1945 and 1951, entirely subsequent, then, to *The North Ship*. The poem which reintroduces Philip Larkin to a reader of that first collection may not offer any surprises. "Wedding-

Wind,” spoken by a woman in celebration of her wedding night, was composed in 1946¹¹ and belongs in spirit to *The North Ship*, which gusts with symbolic winds in twelve of its 31 poems.¹² This lyric speaks to us from a rural past; with the candlelight, the restless horses, the chipped pail, the chicken run, the “thrashing” of the woman’s apron and the clothes on the line, the imagination is carried back to a world of ritual and necessity, where human joy finds its appointed place amid the strife of Nature’s forces. The wedding passion is matched by the passion of the “high wind.” But what begins as an exercise in pictorialism, almost cinematic in quality, with the unsophisticated descriptive voice of the country bride, turns into a labored attempt to comprehend the unthinkable juxtaposition of love and mortality. The woman’s authentic simple-heartedness—“When he came back / He said the horses were restless, and I was sad / That any man or beast that night should lack / The happiness I had”—is lost and a more mature voice, the poet’s, takes over, with three rhetorical questions:

Can it be borne, this bodying-forth by wind
Of joy my actions turn on, like a thread
Carrying beads? Shall I be let to sleep
Now this perpetual morning shares my bed?
Can even death dry up
These new delighted lakes, conclude
Our kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters?

In consequence, Larkin leaves behind an unbalanced poem. The measured resolve and delicate optimism of “Whitsun Weddings,” say, or “Arundel Tomb,” are much more significant as works of joy and celebration, as recognitions of the imperatives of love and the ceremonies that surround it, than the blustery, engaging, but ultimately dissatisfying “Wedding-Wind.” At his best, and his “best” covers the greater part of his slender output, Larkin never “plays” at poetry. He does so to a considerable extent in *The North Ship* because he has not yet found an appropriate voice, and here at the very beginning of *XX Poems* he demonstrates a view of poetry as exercise, as a challenge to versatility for its own sake. In this poem he assumes a serious pose, but sabotages the effect by cross-cutting a descriptive and a reflective response to the wedding night, and so the finished work remains vigorous but confusing.

“Wedding-Wind” is a reminder of the kind of poetry he had offered the public in *The North Ship*, and a survival he still chooses to display; he did, after all, include it again in *The Less Deceived*. In both volumes its open country setting does contrast effectively with the claustrophobic urban sur-

roundings in “Deceptions,” a poem in which a different kind of passion is explored.

What follows in *XX Poems* is a dramatic indication of new principles, framed in the simple brevity of “Modesties,” a lyric which introduces a softening of tone, a growing circumspection. The first of its three quatrains encapsules the poem’s modest proposal:

Words as plain as hen-birds’ wings
Do not lie,
Do not over-broider things—
Are too shy.

The entire poem, in effect, enacts its subject. Plain words and essential thoughts are the elements of the poetry he now has in mind to write. The metaphor here is simple and direct, but by no means commonplace. The repeated negatives in the second and third lines celebrate, paradoxically, the poetic virtues of honesty and simplicity. The fourth line, though positive, still hints at what might be a weakness: the movement is from an implied condemnation of verbal excess to an admission of a timidity which might itself be a form of excess. The balance is a delicate one; the poet seems at once sure of, and taken aback by, the implications of his modest claims. That shyness is something to be proud of and something to question. The final quatrain imagines his own private and possible achievement, but again with cautious and ambiguous negatives:

Weeds are not supposed to grow,
But by degrees
Some achieve a flower, although
No one sees.

The “But” in the second line cancels the “not” in the first, and the poem concludes with an image of bloom, despite the rather uncomplimentary image of the weed. Yet, we are reminded that no one may notice, or perhaps understand the nature of that flowering.

“Modesties” is a poem about relying on one’s poetic instincts, using one’s own resources, curbing extravagance in thought and language, and finding, hopefully, a private and viable form of success in these observances. As a poem about poetic method it is Larkin’s own “ars poetica” and is indeed reminiscent of MacLeish’s poem. A comparison proves instructive. “Ars Poetica” is longer and more elaborate with prescriptions which swell rather than diminish the image of poetry as an autonomous interpretation of experience: “A poem should not mean / But be.” Both “poem” and “should” are used six times in MacLeish’s 24 line work, while Larkin uses

neither the noun nor the auxiliary verb and speaks to himself rather than to an audience. This is a rare occasion for Larkin; he has little time for poems "about poetry,"¹³ but "Modesties" is, significantly, about *his* poetry, with no application beyond himself.

If it is a manifesto poem, as I have suggested, it is, then, a very private manifesto. He takes heed of this motto and in *The Less Deceived* finds that he no longer needs it. It has not been reprinted. Here, in *XX Poems*, consciously or not, it acts as a rebuke to "Wedding-Wind," the poem which precedes it. Its form and message undercut the kind of bravura confidence exhibited there and suggest instead a quiet assuredness which Larkin must cultivate in order to contend with the world in which he lives, with all its deceptions, illusions, and false gods. It points the way toward the discovery and use of irony.

The remaining 18 poems illustrate the growth of this potential but at the same time exemplify the most acute problem Larkin faces in the development of his craft: the temptation to rely on, if not indulge in, the elaborations of metaphor. Having voiced his commitment to "words as plain as hen-birds' wings," he is nonetheless reluctant to shed entirely the trappings of a preconceived notion of poetry, with all its "difficulty," and contrived energy, certainly at its most willful in "Two Portraits of Sex," the volume's immodest centerfold. What he has to learn is that a modest use of metaphor, one which serves a function and allows apt illumination but which falls well short of obscurity, best answers his needs. He does not have to recreate a separate realm of experience; he can describe with imagination and perception the world in which he lives, and his responses to it. He can discover, above all, that this second task will require as much "art." This often painful learning process is evident throughout *XX Poems*, and underscores the difficulty and the effort of Larkin's transition.

The third and fourth poems, both appearing in *The Less Deceived* as "Next, Please," and "Deceptions," though here untitled, contain the essence of Larkin's enduring subject: our "bad habits of expectancy" and self-deception. In the first poem, a strong sense of quotidian reality emerges at the beginning, with a direct address to the reader, and the mocking of our conventional wisdom. If disarmed by this approach we are then alerted to a sudden change of tone and texture, by an example of what becomes one of Larkin's particular skills, the run-on not only from one stanza to the next but from one level of experience to another:

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear,
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.

Thereafter, this "armada" sustains its meaning with a figurative power that matches the literal bluntness of the opening. The final stanza reminds us of the logical extension of our "bad habits," the forgetting of death, which comes unbidden. The poem works in two ways; it brings back some of the death-ship horror from "The North Ship" but prefaces these more traditional poetic images with a noticeably modern voice admitting to a familiar human failing. The title given the poem four years later adds colloquial weight. In this instance the poet manages the extent of the metaphor, controls it, and demonstrates the kind of priority he should be seeking.

Poem IV represents a further important advance for Larkin and remains one of the most significant of these 20 pieces. Above all, the program suggested in "Modesties," the simplicity and caution, is here worked out to its fullest potential, and the poet's honest disclaimers—"I would not dare / Console you if I could. What can be said, / Except that suffering is exact. . . ."—only prove the actual dimensions of his sensibility. He understates his way to truths never before so clearly articulated. Larkin is trying to extend his sympathies over a span of history and discovering the inevitable limitations of this attempt. He can "taste" the grief of the girl who lost her honor and her future while "bridal London" looked the other way, but the barrier of time, "slums, years, have buried you," prevents him from recognizing a full act of consolation. He knows that one's own perceptions can separate one from, as well as connect one with, someone else's experience. He sees, with the coloring of his own growing apprehension of physical passion and its spiritual emptiness, what he knows she would not have been aware of, that she was "less deceived" than her cruel and clumsy seducer, "stumbling up the breathless stair / To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic." He begins, then, his examination of the extent of sympathy with an admission of what he can respond to, over the passage of years, and ends with a confession of what cannot be claimed. We move from stanza one, where the empathy is outlined, to the second stanza where he denies lasting consolation. The entire poem is balanced between what he "will not dare" to presume, as a poet, and what he can in fact achieve even when he draws these limits about him. A careful discipline underlies the poem; the lines, the images all work to a purpose. There is the sharp, crudely physical apprehension of the grief "he made you gulp"; the weak presence of the sun, an indifference in Nature matched by the indifference of a too busy metropolis; the blankness of light, "unanswerable and tall and wide," which prefigures the "deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and

is nowhere, and is endless," from "High Windows," and identifies itself early as Larkin's favored image for that "solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do" ("Ambulances," *The Whitsun Weddings*); the almost Plathlike pain of her mind "open like a drawer of knives," and the stunning spatial image which concludes the poem with a picture of *his* desolation rather than the girl's, and leaves the reader uncomfortably on the edge, faced with other considerations. That "desolate attic" is at once the place where the girl was violated and a metaphor expressing the circumscribed emptiness of passion. The last line has the effect of undercutting any belief we may have salvaged from the poem; there is a sudden and disturbing identification with the seducer. A poem which has its source in documentation from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* reverberates with contemporary significance for poet and reader.

One of the things Larkin has to establish for himself as he transcends an *idea* of poetry and finds his own definition of the art, is the legitimacy of his own response to experience in a contemporary world. A poem from *Whitsun Weddings* which registers well such an acceptance is "Mr. Bleaney." It examines the sense of arrival in a new place, taking over an empty room from an old lodger and replacing someone else's loneliness with one's own. In "Arrival," one of the few titled pieces in *XX Poems*, the cold reality of "Mr. Bleaney" is foreshadowed, and the element of autobiography used directly for the first time. The poem begins with a strong sense of present time and place:

Morning, a glass door, flashes
Gold names off the new city,
Whose white shelves and domes travel
The slow sky all day.
I land to stay here;
And the windows flock open
And the curtains fly out like doves
And the past dries in a wind.

"Arrival" contends with one of those unreal interludes, where the continuity we are used to, and perhaps dread, this constant movement from past to future, is momentarily suspended. It is suspended here because the poet has arrived in a new town to live and has yet to engage with this new stage in his life. The "past dries in the wind" and the future is formless; in fact, as he indicates in the second stanza, he wishes to keep it at bay: "Now let me lie down, under / A wide-branched indifference . . . And let the cluttered-up houses / Keep their thick lives to themselves." The knowledge that the town is unaware of its new citizen gives him momentary

pleasure and peace, but this mood is dulled by the larger awareness of what surrounds this vulnerable paradise, and by a recognition that habit and not novelty governs our lives, no matter how often one moves on, no matter how much time passes:

For this ignorance of me
Seems a kind of innocence.
Fast enough I shall wound it:
Let me breathe till then
Its milk-aired Eden,
Till my own life impound it—
Slow-falling; grey-veil-hung; a theft,
A style of dying only.

His own life will “impound” this precious stillness and that feared continuity will begin again. This life, wherever it may be lived, is “a style of dying only.” That same “style” we witness later in the poem about Mr. Bleaney, and it is confronted there in a manner even more direct and bleak. For both men it is a discovery that “how we live measures our own nature.”

With poem VII we move from an observation anchored, in the first instance, to a sense of place and a specific time to one which is just as clear but which relies more upon an apprehension of generalized experience. This poem seems to have been written with the prescriptions of “Modesties” in mind. Those principles are set to work in a devastatingly concise revelation about the difficulties of terminating a relationship. It is a revelation which never becomes an avowal; it is an anatomy rather than a confession, and echoes Donne’s syllogistic method:

Since the majority of me
Rejects the majority of you,
Debating ends forthwith, and we
Divide. . . .

The argument begins with a confident assertion about rejection and division, decided upon, planned and executed. The process is clinical—re-apportioned “days” are “disinfected” as a new regime of separation takes over—but is rendered finally in language which suggests the weakening of resolve and the pain caused by an arbitrary curtailment of desire and need. “Unshared friends” and “unwalked ways,” dictated by this cutting off of further “debate,” focus on loss rather than decision. The poet’s presence in the poem changes, too, from a public declarative voice—though he is, in fact, addressing the woman—to a lonely disillusionment, as he becomes

aware of a "silence" which proves as "eloquent" as the original decision to "divide." It is a "silence of minorities / That . . . return / Each night with cancelled promises / They want renewed. They never learn." That final sentence, with its colloquial shrug, pulls us from an early seventeenth century poetic design into the context and rhythm of our own speech. Though it concludes the poem, it concludes nothing. The poem is about the absence of conclusion—the "minorities . . . return / *Each* night" and "*never* learn" (my emphasis)—which, Larkin sees, is the abiding condition of human relationship. Our "major" decisions are constantly beset by so-called "minor" doubts. The intrusive power of "silent minorities" in our lives becomes more and more the subject of Larkin's verse. So many of his later poems rely on a process of deflation, of undercutting. Here, with wry economy, he moves from strength and confidence to an awareness of the vulnerability of all our decisions involving those with whom we are intimate. There is also, appropriately, a movement from day to night, recalling a repeated convention in *The North Ship*, the solitary man alone at night, frequently after the departure of a guest, trying to drive the shadows back, to "confront / The instantaneous grief of being alone."¹⁴ In poem VII this confrontation is a less melancholy affair; the condition is more clearly recognized and better endured.

In some ways this exacting poem is a refined version of poem XXIV in *The North Ship*, which begins, again, with echoes of a late Elizabethan or early Jacobean mode, "Love we must part now: do not let it be / Calamitous and bitter," and concludes with the image of two tall ships parting on different courses at the mouth of an estuary. "Always, there is regret." But in Poem VII (*XX Poems*) this presence is subsumed in the eloquent silence. Furthermore, there is no metaphorical illustration, simply debate and demonstration. Larkin is clearly searching for a way to present personal experience, or observations based on it; he is contemplating a reliance on metaphor, or on the formalised arrangement of the poem as anatomy.

Separation, denial, and loss are the subjects, too, of poem XIII in *XX Poems*, and here Larkin decides to rely on metaphor, utilising what is virtually an allegorical landscape, with the bricked-up gates, the planted trees, the "leaves . . . unswept," and the "grass . . . unmown." It is useful to compare VII with XIII because they are both about an agreement to let a relationship "fall to disuse," and the problems attendant upon such a decision. The first poem reaches a point of awareness which is concise and honest, with a touch of wry humor in that final sentence. Because of this the poem and the character of the poet appear less self-regarding. There is a clarity in line and thought. In XIII, which was to be called "No Road" four years later, the sentiments are cluttered and the poem ends on a note of self-conscious analysis which comes close to self pity:

To watch that world come up like a cold sun,
Rewarding others, is my liberty.
Not to prevent it is my will's fulfilment.
Willing it, my ailment.

There is a disturbing calm about the completeness of Larkin's interpretation of this particular loss. His "sense of an ending" becomes one of his major achievements, but here the pace is too contrived; the poem predicts itself. Though failure is perhaps Larkin's predominant theme,¹⁵ his art usually triumphs with such skill that despair is rarely the mood inspired in his readers. In "No Road" it may well be. Larkin remains trapped inside the metaphor of separation he builds here. In VII there is no such structure, but instead a demonstration rendered finally in human terms. The effect of that final "They never learn" is to assert human experience; those "promises" clamoring for "renewal" become us as we struggle with doubt and dissatisfaction. The emphasis in poem XIII is on "*my* ailment," and the poem never takes us beyond that condition; the reader is shut out by those last lines. At his most effective, Larkin includes us, uncompromisingly, giving his own experience enough dimension so that we may recognize a condition everyone has to contend with, whatever degree of success or failure may result.

"Wild Oats" in *The Whitsun Weddings* takes what may be the same experience, an abandoned relationship, and builds around it instead an actual world of "cathedral cities," "two snaps" in a wallet, the "bosomy English rose," and the "friend in specs." Larkin is told by the latter that he is "too selfish, withdrawn, / And easily bored to love," and decides that it is "useful to get that learnt." This is the same ailment acknowledged in "No Road" but in this case the rendering of the experience triumphs with some novel and arresting insights. What Larkin learns is that too much reliance on metaphor, of the elaborate and carefully structured kind that dominates XIII, is in the end a form of evasion, and it produces a staleness of effect.

Poem XV illustrates the same difficulty, though the terse introductory question exposing the power of self-deception once again has a certain technical power: "Who called love conquering, / When its sweet flower / So easily dries among the sour / Lanes of the living?" The entire lyric comprises an allegorical tableau, with the flower of love smothered by the weeds of life and deprived of the life-giving power of the sun. The only touches which suggest the poet's potential for a more original and persuasive handling of a well-worn theme are in the quotidian exactness of the flower's demise "by three o'clock" and the "dire cloak of dark" which "stiffens the town," an ironic allusion to a sexual energy which will forever

lie dormant. Otherwise, the poem indulges itself in romantic melancholy, pursuing no new interpretation of experience.

Metaphor of another and more obscure character is the critical issue in "Two Portraits of Sex," placed side by side at the centre of the volume. These two poems, subtitled "Oils" and "Etching"—the latter survives as "Dry Point" in *The Less Deceived*—attempt to plumb the origin of such experiences as loss and separation, which indeed dominate so many of the poems in this volume. The culprit is identified as the sexual imperative, that "time-honoured irritant." "Dry Point" is better known, even as an anthology piece, and, thanks to George Hartley's astute explication, is better understood: "Directly addressed to a personification of sex, the poems in this volume. The culprit is identified as the sexual imperative, theme the impossibility of reaching any kind of fulfilment through sexual love."¹⁶ The sexual impulse is "Bestial, intent, real," and that "bare and sunscrubbed room, / . . . that padlocked cube of light" is a platonic realm of experience beyond sex from which we are forever excluded. Hartley's interpretation makes a good deal more sense when the "oil" is placed next to the "etching," and we can see that Larkin made some attempt to make himself clear in the latter poem; the meaning is etched deep but there to be discovered. "Oils" is another matter:

Sun. Tree. Beginning. God in a thicket. Crown.
Never-abdicating constellation. Blood.
Barn-clutch of life. Trigger of the future.
Magic weed the doctor shakes in the dance.
Many rains and many rivers, making one river.
Password. Installation. Root of tongues.

In an attempt to isolate and dramatize a primitive instinct which is as old as the beginning of time, Larkin, in this first stanza, daubs his way frenetically about an unlikely canvas, his abrupt words and phrases ringing empty and ineffectually. What remains impressive, by sheer weight of repetition if for no other reason, is the series of negatives in the third and final stanza where the poet's helplessness in the face of life's guiding principle is relentlessly exposed:

No one can migrate across your boundaries.
No one can exist without a habit for you.
No one can tear your thread out of himself.
No one can tie you down or set you free.
Apart from your tribe, there is only the dead,
And even them you grip and begin to use.

In "Reasons for Attendance" (*The Less Deceived*) Larkin asks, "What is Sex?" and does not find an answer. The question remains dramatic, and in the context of that poem especially provocative:

Surely, to think the lion's share
Of happiness is found by couples—sheer

Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned.

But this question is rhetorical, and the rest of the poem benefits from Larkin's decision not to make it otherwise. He does not pursue the investigation here or elsewhere because his interest, that is, outside "Two Portraits," is in the human and social consequences of such drives. He never again visits this almost Darwinian arena, but the fact that he once did and placed these two poems at the center of *XX Poems* is still intriguing. These centerpieces reveal a surviving temptation, dating from the days when his Celtic fever was far from abated, to follow life to its roots—this word appears twice in "Oils"—and to depict it in elemental and mythological terms. The random and desperate energy of "Oils," energy contrived to illustrate energy, is reminiscent of Ted Hughes, and in the third stanza especially the method almost prefigures *Crow*, the last line employing one of Hughes's most used verbs, to grip, in his whole vocabulary of predation. In "Oils" and "Etching" sex is seen as the ultimate enemy, the source of failure in love, but it is only in these poems that Larkin turns back and identifies the source. In the final lines even Death is depicted as victim, gripped and used by a mindless power.

Death, however, progressively in the latter half of *XX Poems* and, of course, in Larkin's later volumes, becomes the thing most feared. The seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth poems confront death in different ways: the first sees death as a governing principle throughout our lives; the second suggests a common wish for death, the "desire for oblivion," and the last acknowledges fear of the unknown. The first, "The Dedicated," concerns itself with a master-servant relationship; man follows in life the rules and bidding of the "angel," death himself, and obeys every command to the last. The poem moves with a kind of religious dignity, and absence of protest and a refusal to struggle. Death is a visitor to be expected and prepared for:

Some must employ the scythe
Upon the grasses.
That the walks be smooth
For the feet of the angel.

Some keep in repair
The locks, that the visitor
Unhindered passes
To the innermost chamber.

There is no “willingness” in this life’s preparation, only an awareness of what Larkin calls in the second of three stanzas, “eternal requirings.” Nonetheless, a shift in emphasis is recognizable within the poem. Larkin begins with “Some must . . .,” suggesting compulsion, and he ends with the more passive, “wait,” and a sense of resignation. The scythe of death is employed by us “upon the grasses,” upon our own lives; it embodies our knowledge of the coming visitation, necessarily governs our apprehension of experience, until the time comes when that scythe is in the angel’s hands. The only respite possible is neither sought nor taken intensely:

And if they have leave
To pray, it is for contentment
If the feet of the dove
Perch on the scythe’s handle,
Perch once, and then depart
Their knowledge. . . .

In the end it is simply a matter of waiting upon “the colder advent, / The quenching of candles.” Without images of terror or mystery—the “grass,” the “smooth walks,” the “angel,” the “chamber,” the “dove”—Larkin portrays life as the way to death, as a bird will use its wings to “fly to the fowler’s compass.” Our agreement with the “angel” is our first and last relationship. There is cohesion and order in the poem, yet, at the same time, an underlying sense of uncertainty. To describe life as a dedication to death is to pose other and more searching questions. The difficulty of such a sustained dedication to death is explored in later poems, and the stark reality of death is frequently stressed in a more contemporary setting, in a landscape not allegorical as it is in “The Dedicated” but identifiably ours; in, for example, “Ambulances” (*The Whitsun Weddings*) and the “clean-sliced cliff” which is “The Building” (*High Windows*).

There are hints of this contemporary world in the much shorter lyric that follows, with its telegraphed suggestions of daily ritual, the “invitation-cards,” the “printed directions of sex,” the family photograph, and the “life insurance,” which cannot counteract our own “desire for oblivion.” “Wants,” the eighteenth poem, translates into more accessible terms the true spirit of our dedication today. We still obey those “eternal requirings” but we do so from our own will, not as servants of some higher command, but as

individuals craving peace and final solitude. The incantatory quality of, "Beyond all this, the wish to be alone," and, "Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs," lines which, respectively, begin and end the first and second stanzas, is reminiscent of Dylan Thomas's rhetorical method in "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" and "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night." Larkin, however, replaces the "hwyl" and grand gestured challenge of Thomas's lines with his own ironic admission of a common death wish.

Poem XIX, called "Going" in *The Less Deceived*, closes with that very "oblivion" and depicts its approach allegorically, yet in a kinetic manner. The "quenching of candles," that "colder advent," is met head on; the waiting turns into a growing apprehension of something not quite expected. There is an increasing sense of panic in the face of death, in the guise of falling dusk, which advances across the poet's vision, "silken . . . at a distance," but like the winding sheet, bringing no comfort. At the moment of truth, then, that desire turns to fear. Larkin, in one compact sentence, exposes the simplest meaning of death, as the absence of life, of the missing essence: "Where has the tree gone, that locked / Earth to the sky?" The poem concludes with two more questions:

What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?

What loads my hands down?

Despite this metaphorical treatment of death's capture of life, its relentless negating invasion of all that gives meaning, the final stress is on physical sensation, or rather a new and terrible deprivation of normal sensory experience. The destination ("What is under my hands?") is not known and the force responsible ("What loads my hands down?") is not understood. The poem is about the coming of the ultimate blindness; the questions are asked with such desperation because the poet can no longer see. Death remains an entrance to an incomprehensible oblivion.

Though the questions asked in "Going" go unanswered also in Larkin's subsequent poems about death, the experience there is seen in more realistic and specific terms. For example, in "The Old Fools" (*High Windows*) Larkin elaborates on the process of dying which is old age. In the final stanza there are four searching questions which end this time with the curt response: "Well, / We shall find out." It is enough to know that "nothing contravenes / The coming dark" ("The Building," *High Windows*).

XX *Poems* does not end on such a note, however. From XX *Poems* to *High Windows* all the concluding poems offer a sense of calm and affirmation: in *The Whitsun Weddings* it is "Arundel Tomb" with its poignant

assertion, "What will survive of us is love," and in *High Windows*, it is the vision of the dead coal miner in "The Explosion" still "showing the eggs unbroken." *XX Poems*, the *Fantasy Press* pamphlet, and *The Less Deceived* all end with "At Grass."¹⁷

With this last poem Larkin steps back from the struggle to tame metaphor—at once a wish to be liberated from it as well as the desire to control it—and from rhetorical confrontations with the larger human themes of love, loss, and death. He concentrates instead on the perceived world, and a world particularly English and pastoral in its flavor, a group of retired racehorses resting in a field. Paradoxically, Larkin is able to reconnect himself, and us, with those larger questions, but he does so with less rhetorical urgency, and more detachment. "At Grass" is still "about" withdrawal from the demands and imposed responsibilities of life, a desire for peace and rest, and the chance to stand "anonymous again." But there is affirmation in the record of an active life—"the starting-gates, the crowds, the cries"—in the fact that "their names live," and that there survives in their waning days some care and companionship: "Only the groom, and the groom's boy, / With bridles in the evening come." The eye which "can hardly pick them out" at the beginning of the poem belongs to the observer who is concerned about these questions of futurity, and the scene depicted, the racehorses sheltering in the "cold shade," helps formulate an idea about the twilight of life, of talent, of whatever one's *raison d'être*. There is only one question in the poem, "Do memories plague their ears like flies?" and it sits comfortably at the beginning of the penultimate stanza, and is further neutralized by the pathetic fallacy which follows: "They shake their heads." We cannot tell and perhaps it does not matter.

The poem returns quickly to a comparison between the specifics of their lives then, and the welcome quiet of their lives now, uncomplicated and unpressured by fieldglass or stopwatch. The horses are ultimately left to themselves, as Larkin decides to avoid further speculation which may have relevance for him. The "evening" which comes in poem XX, in contrast to that which slips upon us in XIX, is welcomed rather than feared; the sombre perspectives of desired oblivion are muted. Death, the final anonymity, is yet to be countenanced. The impulse toward nostalgia is strong here, true, but it falls far short of the weaknesses frequently associated with that mood. The past, present, and future coexist assuredly in this technically assured poem.

This same level of technical achievement, and the same affirmative merging of time, may be witnessed in poem XII, which ranks with "Deceptions" and "At Grass" as one of the most effective and affecting examples of lyric verse in *XX Poems*. The subject of the first sentence is light, an image which has played a significant part in Larkin's poetry from "The

North Ship" to "High Windows." Here it is "chill and yellow," and suburbanized, bathing "the serene / Foreheads of houses," while a thrush sings and heralds Spring. Upon hearing this song the poet, "whose childhood / Is a forgotten boredom," feels "like a child / Who comes on a scene / Of adult reconciling, / And can understand nothing / But the unusual laughter, / And starts to be happy." The song of the bird, a natural energy, "astonishing the brickwork," asserts the present, gives it sound and beauty and value as the evenings gradually lengthen, and it promises the advance of a repeated genesis: "It will be Spring soon, / It will be Spring soon." These lines duplicate the thrush's warbling cadence. The past is also evoked and given a value of its own; though the child can understand "nothing" and finds the laughter "unusual" (my emphasis), he nonetheless "starts to be happy." The bird's song becomes a vehicle for the poet's reconciliation of past, present, and future. The final affirmation, as we come to expect with Larkin, is cautious but earned. This poem, as does the entire volume, suggests beginning, new poetic incarnations. "Coming," "At Grass," and "Deceptions" are themselves enough to indicate the grace and intelligence of Larkin's mature achievement.

XX *Poems* is an attempt to redefine Larkin's poetic sensibility after the enervating and imitative indulgences of *The North Ship* and the complete failure of *In the Grip of Light*. An urge to display a variety of talent, for its own sake, is still apparent—the pretensions and obscurities of "Two Portraits of Sex" and the embarrassing self-analysis of "If, My Darling," for example—but the germ of Larkin's authentic voice is there. The second poem, "Modesties," as I have suggested, announces this new authenticity, but underestimates the true impact of his developing skills. He learns to curb poetic language dominated by rhetorical and metaphorical excess, to walk Amis's "temperate zone";¹⁸ he learns that metaphor is best used as a trope which deepens reflection, rather than as a structural principle which can strangle the life out of a poem, and he begins to understand at last that his own frequently ironic response to his life, and the life of his fellow, will provide his subject matter. It is here that he will make his poetry, not from the "myth-kitty"¹⁹ or any other such traditional source. This awareness of a new and appropriate direction, together with surviving temptations for less appropriate poetic ambitions, may be witnessed in XX *Poems*. The future of a poet is proposed in this volume, and is proposed modestly; it provides the necessary rehearsal for the sound judgments of *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *High Windows*.

NOTES

¹ *The North Ship* (1945; rpt. London: Faber, 1966), pp. 7-9. Larkin refers to the "particularly potent music" of Yeats which "ruined many a better talent."

² *XX Poems* (The Author: Queen's College, Belfast, 1951). There is no pagination. Permission to quote from this volume was kindly granted by Mr. Larkin.

³ They are, in the order they appear in *The Less Deceived*, with their earlier numerals in parentheses: "Wedding-Wind" (I), "Coming" (XII), "Dry-Point" (XI), "Next Please" (III), "Going" (XIX), "Wants" (XVIII), "No Road" (XIII), "Wires" (XVI), "Spring" (VIII), "Deceptions" (IV), "Latest Face" (V), "If, My Darling" (XIV), and "At Grass" (XX). Of these, only "Wedding-Wind," "Spring," and "Wants" had titles in *XX Poems*, while "Dry-Point" was originally called "Etching."

⁴ Philip Oakes, "The Unsung Gold Medallist: Portrait of a Poet," *Sunday Times Magazine* (March 27, 1966), p. 65. This lesson, Larkin admits here, was imparted to him by Vernon Watkins.

David Timms, in his excellent study, *Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 69, comments: "Between the publication of *XX Poems* and *The Less Deceived* . . . he had recognized the manner and form in which he wrote most effectively." In his few general remarks on *XX Poems*, pp. 68-9, Timms makes no mention of the unprinted pieces.

⁵ *The Month* (November, 1951), pp. 309-10. Of the ten volumes of verse discussed by Enright, Larkin's is described as the "most impressive." He elaborates: "The author . . . has that respect for language which is beginning to look old-fashioned these days; he persuades words into being poetry, he does not bully them. This little pamphlet whets the appetite; it is to be hoped that some publisher will take the hint."

⁶ *British Poetry Since 1945* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1970), p. 127.

⁷ Amis did make an earlier appearance with *Bright November* (London: Fortune Press, 1947). These poems, however, most dating from 1943 and a few even earlier, do not convey much certainty of style.

⁸ Larkin appeared in No. 21 (March 1954), and was represented by: "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album," "Whatever Happened," "If, My Darling," "Arrivals, Departures," and "At Grass." "If, My Darling," and "At Grass" were reprinted from *XX Poems*, and all of them were published in *The Less Deceived* the following year.

Consult Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, eds., *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey* (Oxford: Carcanet Press, 1972), pp. 260-84, for an invaluable bibliography of published verse in the post-war period, compiled by Barbara Atkinson.

⁹ "Editor's Introduction," *Springtime: An Anthology of Young Poets* (London: Peter Owen, 1953), p. 12: "Irish poets, like Mr. Larkin, though writing in standard English, reflect another regional value, that of rootedness; Mr. Larkin's horses and meadows and creaking stable doors are more real to him than the physical furniture of London is to the abstracted metropolitan mind." The fact that Larkin had this volume published while a sub-librarian at Queen's, Belfast, obviously leads the editors to their "regional" identification. In the bibliographical note Larkin is described as the author of "one volume of poems" and "a novel." (p. 60)

¹⁰ Schmidt and Lindop, p. 73.

¹¹ Larkin's unpublished notebook, *in full*: MS. 52619, in the British Library, provides this date.

¹² Namely: I, VI, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XVII, XXI, XXII, XXIV, XXXI, from the 31 poems which comprise the first edition of *The North Ship*.

¹³ The subject of poetry and poetic inspiration may be found in poems IX, XVII, and XX in *The North Ship*, and there is "that lifted, rough-tongued bell / (Art if you like)" from "Reasons for Attendance" in *The Less Deceived*.

¹⁴ Poem VI from *The North Ship*; a similar loneliness is described in IV, XVI, XVIII.

¹⁵ Geoffrey Thurley describes "failure" as the "great theme of all Larkin's work," in *The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (London: Arnold, 1974), p. 147. Calvin Bedient, in gentler tones, refers to Larkin's "ancient familiarity with defeat" in his critical study, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 70.

¹⁶ "No Right of Entry," *Phoenix* (Autumn and Winter, 1973-74), p. 107.

¹⁷ David Timms in this connection remarks: "Larkin has a fine dramatic sense, within poems and within collections." "'Church Going' Revisited: 'The Building' and The Notion of Development in Larkin's Poetry," *Phoenix* (Autumn and Winter, 1973-74), p. 15.

¹⁸ From Kingsley Amis's "Against Romanticism," a manifesto poem included in *New Lines*.

¹⁹ Philip Larkin, in *Poets of the Fifties: Anthology of New English Verse*, ed. D. J. Enright (Tokyo: The Kenkyusha Press, 1955), p. 78.

CRITICISM / M. D. UROFF

Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration

When M. L. Rosenthal first used the term, confessional poetry, he had in mind a phase in Robert Lowell's career when Lowell turned to themes of sexual guilt, alcoholism, confinement in a mental hospital, and developed them in the first person in a way that intended, in Rosenthal's view, to point to the poet himself. Rosenthal was careful to limit the possibilities of the mode but he did name Sylvia Plath a confessional poet as well because, he said, she put the speaker herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization.¹ Rosenthal's widely accepted estimation was challenged first by Ted Hughes who pointed out that Plath uses autobiographical details in her poetry in a more emblematic way than Lowell, and more recently by Marjorie Perloff who claims that Plath's poetry lacks the realistic detail of Lowell's work.² If Hughes and Perloff are right, and I think they are, then we should reconsider the nature of the speaker in Plath's poems, her relationship to the poet, and the extent to which the poems are confessional.